

Signal Corps Retention: The Incentive Plan Won't Help
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Signal Corps Retention: The Incentives Won't Help

The Signal Corps is losing many officers and future leaders. These losses are not those who died in combat, but the officers that served and left. Many young officers are leaving the Army after their initial commitment is fulfilled, according to a report by Thom Shanker's article in the New York Times, "Young Officers Leaving Army At a High Rate":

In 2001, but before the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, 9.3 percent of the Army's young officers left active duty at their first opportunity. By 2002, the number of those junior officers leaving at their first opportunity dropped to 7.1 percent, and in 2003, only 6.3 percent opted out. But the number grew to 8.3 percent in 2004 and 8.6 percent in 2005.¹

These numbers are alarming, because it takes at least 10 - 12 years to build an officer with enough experience to function at a major's level.² As Charles A. Henning states in a CRS report to Congress, "Army Officer Shortage: Background of Issues for Changes":

The Army currently projects an officer shortage of approximately 3,000 officers in FY 2007, a situation

that worsens to 3,700 officers in FY 2008 and continues to average more than 3,000 annually through FY 2013. This could result in 15% to 20% of all positions at the rank of major being vacant or filled by more junior and less experienced officers.³

These attrition rates mentioned above will greatly impact the operational strength in the future.

In October 2007 the Army approved an officer's incentive plan to keep officers on active duty past their initial obligation. This incentive plan guarantees paying for graduate school, money up \$35,000, various other military schools, or a transfer to another branch. Whichever incentive selected, the officer accrued more time. The plan is designed to keep a captain in past their initial obligation to make major and reach ten years of service. The targeted audience is all junior captains between their 4th to 8th years of service. This plan sounds good, but will not it help the Army retain and grow leaders of the future, especially in the Signal Corps. The Signal Corps can not retain its officers with incentives alone; it needs to extend core entry level training, improve leadership and management, and decrease civilian dependency in its units.

Crash Course Entry Training

Most officers that are accessed into signal do not possess in depth knowledge of computers, systems, and networking. The Signal Corps does not require officers to have a degree in the IT (Internet Technology) field. The current SOBC (Signal Officer Basic Course) is only 13 weeks. During this time lieutenants are taught:

- Intro on Army Operations doctrine
- Automation
- Communications planning
- Execution and management
- Automation/communications interface
- Communications requirements unique to a Maneuver Battalion or Brigade; offense; defense, leadership
- Electronics
- Combat net radio
- Tropospheric scattering
- Property accountability
- Telecommunications
- COMSEC
- Training management
- Military justice
- Information systems; Signal tactics and doctrine
- S-6 functions
- Joint Node Network (JNN) modularity topics (equipment overview, equipment orientation, and the field training exercise).⁴

Once trained for only 13 weeks, lieutenants are expected to know and employ multiple systems. The IT field is only half of the knowledge that signal officer's must retain. There are systems needed to support units such as radios, COMSEC, and overall advising the commanders.

SOBC must be longer in order to set the foundations. Theoretical knowledge of computers and systems requires more time to retain, especially for those with an IT background. It is difficult for a new officer to absorb all this information in 13 weeks. For example, network management using Cisco routers is 280 hours for civilians.⁵ Also, there should be more comprehensive training on server management, lifecycle management and active directory. This will give officers the knowledge to install, maintain and operate networks and equipment. Also, SOBC should require all signal officers to have certifications before graduation, such as Certified CISCO Network Administrator (CCNA), or equivalent. SOBC should at least 6 months to provide well-rounded theory-based and practical knowledge or mandate a communication based degree prior to the officers' accession. This will instill competence and confidence in the new officer.

Better Management and Improved Leadership

By instilling competence and improving the knowledge of an officer will prepare them for the demanding jobs in the signal corps. The second reason why the incentives program will not work for signal corps officers is the dynamics of tactical versus strategic units along with the poor management of its officers. Most combat battalion and brigade commanders do not

understand or want to know the details required to install, operate and maintain a network and systems. Commanders want it done and ready.

Commanders demand uninterrupted communications at all times. These demands will vary from unit to unit, depending on the structure and equipment utilized. Communications differ between tactical and strategic units. For example, tactical units rely heavily on mobile communications such as the newly implemented JNN (Joint Network Node), while strategic units mainly depend on fixed communication infrastructure to support bigger bandwidths and throughput. Doctrines for both of these units are changing along with the Army's transformation. It is important that junior signal officers are managed better and constantly rotate between tactical and strategic units. This will provide officers with a wider knowledge and greater opportunities on becoming a more effective signal officer, regardless of assignment. Although leadership styles differ greatly from one unit to the next, senior leaders should strive to create a more positive command climate.

Positive command climate will increase officer retention rates. LTC Lee A. Staab who wrote, "Key to Officer Retention" states how management plays an important role with leadership styles:

The top-down method of management fosters layers of bureaucracy that kill motivation. The old style of management often used fear as a motivator. The new vision takes a radically different view of human nature. It recognizes that most people have tremendous levels of enthusiasm and energy and naturally want to contribute to something they feel is important. To tap that incredible energy, leaders must give people the authority to eliminate the obstacles they face. The new leaders must be able to persuade them to invest wholeheartedly in the mission, through his or her vision and actions.⁶

Currently, most senior leaders create a negative command climate within the Signal Corps and non-signal units. One captain explains why he left the Army for a civilian job with General Electric in LTC Lee A. Staab's thesis- "*Key to Officer Retention*":

Senior leaders take too much responsibility and accountability from junior leaders. The trend is to declare and edict from above and then tell us 'how to do it.' Instead of just telling me what to do, senior leaders get involved in every detail. Edicts from higher disrupt life in the trenches because they

neglect to take into account their effect on subordinate units and junior leader development. I still had a company to run while the only thing that staffs have to do is to think up more information requirements or more slides for a briefing.⁷

This type of leadership described above is more prevalent in the Army today.

Civilian Dependence

More junior officers are leaving not only because of its leadership, but also the constant exposure and dependence the Signal Corps have with civilians. This is the third reason why the incentives program will not work in Signal Corps. They depend heavily on civilian contractors to engineer and install networks, such as firewalls and new procured equipment. The Signal Corps must wean itself off dependency on civilians. Officers are exposed to civilians doing the bulk of the technical expertise that many signal officers want to do. In most situations, officers have to interface and coordinate with civilians in regards to the Army's own network. The networks should be operated (technically) by Army officers and soldiers. Almost every TCF (Technical Control Facility) in Iraq was

operated and maintained by more civilians than military personnel in Iraq during OIF 05-07.

The Army spends millions of dollars on civilian contracts for newer and better technology. For instance, on 15 November 2007, US Army awarded General Dynamics C4 Systems a \$78.3 million initial order for the Warfighter Information Network-Tactical (WIN-T) Increment One.⁸ This network is designed for US soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan capable of broadband network and satellite communications.⁹ Generally, when a system is purchased, contractors follow and train soldiers on the equipment. The Army should purchase the new systems and conduct training, but eliminate the civilian contractors coming to war. Officers are constantly exposed to the civilians, which has a negative effect on retention. For example, most officers realize that civilians are paid twice as much and work less. Civilian contractors do not have to associate themselves with the rigors of combat operations, briefing, etc. In Iraq there are more civilian contractor engineering, designing and operating networks than officers. To most signal officer, they would rather be controlling the network to a fine detail, because it is the responsibility of the signal officer to operate and maintain the network and systems.

Summary

The officer incentive plan was designed to retain young captains in longer enough to make the rank of Major. Once they make Major most officers should be at 10 years of service. Normally, an officer who has 10 years of military probably will stay in longer. The incentives plan will not work for the Army Signal Corps. It is like putting a band-aid over a bleeding wound that won't heal. Today, signal officers are arriving to their units barely trained in a communications crash course that should be 6 months not 13 weeks. Normally these officers are unprepared for the hardship of a SIGO (Signal Officer). They are exposed to poor management and leadership. Also, civilians in units expose the officers to a possible better way of life without the military hardships. Unfortunately the incentive plan is a waste of taxpayers' money, because when the signal officer finishes the incentive obligation, they will leave and flourish into the civilian populace.

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